

## Concern grows about looming elimination of Montgomery school police officers

Officials worry about impact of their absence, but budget unforgiving

by Andrew Ujifusa | Staff Writer

Montgomery County Board of Education member Michael A. Durso only has to recollect a 2009 bomb plot at his former school to show the crucial role played by nine police officers whose assignments to county schools are on the chopping block.

In the spring of that year, two students at Silver Spring's Springbrook High School allegedly planned to set off an explosion using the school's natural gas lines and to assault a school counselor and Durso, then the school's principal. The school resource officer assigned to Springbrook, Officer Rodney Barnes (then called an educational facilities officer) said he was given details of the bomb plot during a talk he had with one of the students involved.

Durso (D-Dist. 5) said Barnes' constant presence in the school was crucial to the student's willingness to reveal the plan.

"I'm not sure that would have happened with a stranger," Durso said.

Included in the \$36 million in budget cuts recommended by County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) last week is the elimination of the nine school resource officer positions assigned to Montgomery County Public Schools. Last school year, there were 33 educational facilities officers before the number was reduced to nine.

Before last year's cuts, 24 officers were assigned to all but one of the county's high schools, with Gaithersburg High School assigned an officer by Gaithersburg city police. Two officers were assigned to two middle schools in the county, and the program had six supervising sergeants.

The nine remaining officers now are assigned to cover the same 24 high schools. They also can cover other schools if required.

From the start of the school year through the end of October, police recorded 190 calls for service from the county's public high schools during school hours — records were not available for November. That represents a 22 percent decline from last year during the same period, when there were 246 calls for service to county police from schools.

Police said they haven't studied why the calls have decreased, including whether the drop-off is the result of fewer officers to phone in service requests.

Some of the calls were from school resource officers, but others were made by students reporting incidents that occurred off school property, said county police spokesman Capt. Paul Starks. Not all the calls required police action, he added.

For the 2009-10 school year, police were called to county public high schools for serious incidents 439 times, according to the school system's Office of Shared Accountability, although some of those calls were classified as situations requiring medical assistance or the malfunction of essential equipment.

The County Council initially voted in May to eliminate all the officers — who are armed and in uniform while at schools — before it restored the number to nine. Removing the nine officers from the public high schools in the county would save about \$500,000, after the county budgeted \$970,000 for them for this fiscal year.

Durso said the school system should consider folding the cost for the officers into the schools' budget. During budget discussions for fiscal 2011, the school system said it would be willing to pay \$2 million to retain 17 of the 33 officers.

But school board member Patricia B. O'Neill (Dist. 3) said given the school system's own budget problems, taking on the cost of the officers was unlikely. The school system reduced its operating budget from \$2.2 billion to \$2.1 billion this fiscal year.

"It's unrealistic to think that we would absorb nine," said O'Neill, who said she was disappointed but not surprised Leggett was recommending eliminating the positions.

O'Neill recalled that when the educational facilities officers began work in 2003, many in the community expressed concern about the prospect of officers with firearms in schools. She also noted that during the school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., in 1999, an equivalent of a school resource officer was present at the school.

"What is most important is adults in the building having relationships with kids. Somebody has to be paying attention," O'Neill said.

Board member Judith Docca (Dist. 1) of Montgomery Village agreed with O'Neill that the school system wouldn't have room in its budget for the officers, but she pointed out it only would take one major incident for the community to recognize their importance.

"This is the kind of thing that everybody would be aware of and horrified by," Docca said.

Starks said the source of the funding, whether it be county government or the school system, would not affect the police department's mission in the schools. But the reduction in officers definitely has changed the police work, he said.

"It has limited us," Starks said. "If you have one officer handling multiple schools versus one that was assigned to a specific high school, there's only so much time in an eight-hour day."

Still, the quality of the school resource officer can be more important than the amount of time the officer is able to spend in school, said Jim Fernandez, principal of Albert Einstein High School in Kensington.

Like other schools, Einstein has security cameras and security officers who handle minor incidents that don't involve classroom discipline, such as thefts from lockers. Last year, police were called to Einstein 25 times for serious incidents, including six incidents involving weapons, three involving drugs and three involving physical assaults or attacks. Sixteen of the calls were for medical assistance.

"It's nice to see that car parked out there regularly," Fernandez said of the school officer's presence. "Not 10 of them, just one."